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CIA CHIEF SAYS TERRORISM THREAT UNCHANGED SINCE GULF WAR
 By Jim Wolf

LANGLEY, Virginia, May 30, Reuter - Outgoing Central Intelligence Agency director William Webster said on Thursday the threat of Middle East-related guerrilla violence remained basically unchanged since the end of hostilities in the Gulf.

"I don't think the level (of the threat) has changed since the war ended," he told reporters at a farewell briefing at CIA headquarters here. "It hasn't increased and I would be reluctant to say it had diminished."

Webster said he had no indication of a possible guerrilla link to the chartered Austrian Boeing 767 airliner that exploded in mid-air on Sunday night shortly after taking off from Bangkok, killing all 223 people aboard.

The Thai authorities "seem to think there may have been engine problems," he said. Although he said he had not yet heard what was on the aircraft's "black box" flight recorder, Webster added: "We shouldn't draw any quick conclusions."

Webster attributed the lack of any clear-cut post-Gulf War guerrilla riposte against Western interests to caution by President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

"I think that what we are seeing is a Saddam Hussein who wisely judges that such terrorist incidents might cause reactions that would impede his ability to complete his control of Iraq and rehabilitation of Iraq," he said.

Webster, talking to reporters over breakfast, said Syria had played a role, "rather a unilateral one," in heading off any spectacular guerrilla attacks during the Gulf war, but declined to elaborate.

On another subject, Webster said he was "cautiously optimistic" that the ordeal of Western hostages held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian militias might be over soon. He cited unspecified signs "reminiscent of times when hostages were released" in the past.

A deputy Iranian foreign minister, Abbas Maleki, told Reuters in Tehran on Wednesday: "The hostage game is over. Chances are that their whole ordeal will end."

Webster said the United States, working with other countries, had pieced together "more than a circumstantial case" against the bombers of Pan Am Flight 103.

A total of 270 people died in the December 21, 1988 bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland. Iranian officials had publicly

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threatened retaliation after the USS Vincennes mistakenly shot down an Iranian Airbus over the Straits of Hormuz in July 1988, killing 290 people.

Webster said of the Pan Am bombing: ``There were lots of players, not necessarily coordinated,'' he said, ``A number of nations implicated.''

Webster denied charges the United States might be trying to shift blame to Libya for a logistical role in the bombing and away from Syria because Syria had sided with the anti-Saddam coalition during the war.

``This is simply not true,'' he said, adding: ``I can't address what the State Department's druthers might be.''

41.